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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

AMERICA AT THE "FORK IN THE ROAD" TO VIETNAM

CORE COURSE 2 ESSAY

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CORE COURSE 2

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the United States' decision in early 1965 to escalate its involvement in Vietnam, using the principles of Clausewitz as reference. I will focus on the strategy employed in this decision and assess the applicability of Clausewitz' theories in light of our experience there.

The decision to escalate our commitment to the war in Vietnam was made by President Johnson over the period January to July 1965. Escalation was begun in two related phases, the first being the initiation of a sustained bombing campaign against various targets in North Vietnam. The second phase was the introduction of American combat ground forces, initially to protect the bases from which to stage the bombing raids, and then to conduct actual assault operations against Viet Cong units.

As then Secretary of Defense McNamara wrote:

The six months that followed our "fork in the road" memo marked the most crucial phase of America's thirty-year involvement in Indochina. Between January 28 and July 28, 1965, President Johnson confronted the issues . . . and made the fateful choices that locked the United States onto a path of massive military intervention in Vietnam, an intervention that ultimately destroyed his presidency and polarized America like nothing since the Civil War.

(McNamara 169)

## ANALYSIS

**Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war. Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time. Theory becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgement and help him to avoid pitfalls.**  
(Clausewitz 141)

**Do the theories expounded by Clausewitz over 150 years ago apply to the situation we faced in Vietnam? Do his military theories fit the reality of world events as we saw them in 1965? Could we have avoided the pitfalls of Vietnam if we had used Clausewitz as a guide? To assess the validity and applicability of Clausewitz to Vietnam in 1965, I will address three basic questions: what was the nature of the war; what was its purpose; and how was it conducted?**

### NATURE OF WAR

**The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.**  
(Clausewitz 88-89)

**What was the nature of the war as understood by President Johnson and his advisors as they approached the "fork in the road"? What kind of war did they perceive it to be? The war up until this point and certainly the war Johnson inherited from President Kennedy was a war of counterinsurgency. Kennedy perceived the aggression in South Vietnam as part of a "whole new kind of warfare" that characterized the grand strategy of**

the worldwide Communist movement in the era of nuclear weapons. It was therefore necessary for the United States to develop and exercise a counterinsurgency capability. As Kennedy said in 1961: "Now we face a new and different threat. Thus the local conflict they [the Communists] support can turn in their favor through guerrillas or insurgents or subversion. . .It is clear that this struggle in this area of the new and poorer nations will be a continuing crisis of this decade." (Summers 72).

But by the end of 1964 it was clear that the efforts of the South Vietnamese Army as assisted and advised by the United States were insufficient to prevent defeat. Johnson knew he had to do something, but was uncertain what action to take. His advisors were telling him, and the military believed, that this was a unique, "new" kind of war. It was generally agreed that this was a "limited" form of war, but we had no clear blueprint for what this meant, or how it should be approached. For various reasons, the lessons of Korea were thought not to apply, save for the one that it is imperative not to get the Chinese directly involved.

Clausewitz addressed limited war when he wrote: "In war many roads lead to success, and. . .they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat"(Clausewitz 94). He also discusses the concept of limited war in three chapters of Book Eight of On War. There he discusses what can be done if defeat of the enemy is not possible, or if one's political objectives have limited aims, as in either a defensive war or an offensive war of limited aims. But nowhere does Clausewitz assert that this "limited" form of war somehow changes the nature of the conflict, or allows the participants to ignore the basic principles of war which he spells out throughout his work. Yet we believed that this was a different form of war, and so it could be treated and fought differently.

Of the many mistakes that this mistreatment generated, perhaps the most basic ( in Clausewitz' view) was President Johnson's decision not to mobilize the American public behind the war or to get Congress to legitimize it by asking for a declaration of war. Johnson's reasons for this decision were based on several political, domestic and international considerations. Not the least of these was his overriding concern that a major war effort would endanger the sweeping social reforms contained in his "Great Society" program. He feared, in early 1965, that: "If I left the woman I really loved - the Great Society - in order to get involved in that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home." (Summers, Lessons 111). His tragic mistake was knowingly embarking down the "fork in the road" leading to a major commitment of the United States military, while consciously deciding not to focus the nation's attention on the conflict or to clarify the reasons for the sacrifices they would have to make. As Colonel Summers said: "War, whether limited or not, imposes a unique national effort." (Summers, Lessons 110). By not including the people in this decision, the government failed to maintain a balance between Clausewitz' "trinity of war", the people, the government, and the Army. As Clausewitz warned: "A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless." (Clausewitz 89). President Johnson's lack of understanding of the basic nature of war caused him to commit the "peoples' army" without the backing of those people. The ensuing conflict was thereafter not an "American" war, but "Johnson's " war and then "Nixon's" war. The ramifications of this were to be felt over the next three years as the body bags came home in ever increasing numbers and anti- war sentiment grew into a force which the enemy utilized to

his great advantage and which our government eventually could no longer ignore. The American people, not knowing they had become involved in a major conflict, much less knowing why, felt betrayed by their government. Paradoxically, among the many other casualties of this war, both human and institutional, was the great project which President Johnson was attempting to protect, his Great Society. The huge financial cost of the war had a major impact on the American economy and took its toll on the many programs Johnson so desperately wished to complete.

This failure to understand the basic nature of war, and the "trinity" on which it is based had profound effects on all aspects of American involvement in the war, including understanding its purpose and how it should be conducted.

## PURPOSE OF WAR

What was the purpose of the war? Clausewitz defined war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will", and that the object, or purpose of war, is to "impose our will on the enemy" (Clausewitz 75). He further wrote that "the political object - the original motive for the war - will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires." (Clausewitz 81). As Bernard Brodie observed, Clausewitz is pertinent in the modern world because of "his tough minded pursuit of the idea that war in all its phases must be rationally guided by meaningful political purposes. ( On War, 51)

What was the political object - the purpose - of the Vietnam War, and how did it

translate into the military objective and the amount of effort required? In 1965, President Johnson had many problems on his mind in addition to Vietnam. While certainly of national security interest, Vietnam was only part of the larger issue of containing Communist expansion globally. As a result of the government's many preoccupations, and because of the misperception as to the nature of the war, American political objectives remained unclear throughout the war. Colonel Summers notes that University of Nebraska Professor Arnold found twenty-two separate American rationales for involvement in Indonesia. Arnold groups these objectives into three major categories: from 1949 until 1962, the emphasis was on resisting Communist aggression; from 1962 until about 1968, . . . counterinsurgency; after 1968, preserving the integrity of American commitments was the main emphasis. (Summers 98)

General Westmoreland wrote that in 1965 the objective of the American Military Assistance Command in Vietnam was: " To assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment." (Westmoreland 57). These are, as Colonel Summers observes, two separate and divergent tasks, one political (nation building) and the other military (defeating external aggression). As Summers notes, we never really focused on the external enemy, North Vietnam, but rather on the symptom of that aggression, the guerrilla war in the South. This military objective was also relegated to a secondary priority after that of attempting to build and sustain a viable nation in South Vietnam. (Summers 102). Given the great political disarray, and lack of substantive leadership in South Vietnam, this was a formidable task. Even in the military objective, we were unable to concentrate on the

purpose of the war, since, as Summers noted, we focused on the symptom vice the real enemy. We allowed ourselves to believe the propaganda being generated by Hanoi that this was a revolutionary war, a peoples' war of insurrection. This caused us to fight the wrong enemy. Although the Viet Cong appeared to be the enemy, particularly during the period 1961-1965, this was of course not true. The guerrillas in the south were able to operate for extended periods without direction or support from the north, but they were clearly an instrument of Hanoi. As early as 1959, Hanoi had made the decision to reunify Vietnam by force (Pike 73), and the guerrillas in the south were the first phase of the unification plan.

We weren't fighting the real enemy and so our tactics, however sound on the battlefield, could not deter the enemy from the accomplishment of his objectives. As Clausewitz wrote: "No one starts a war - or rather no one in his senses ought to do so, without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it." (Clausewitz 579). Our intentions in Vietnam, and specifically the intentions behind the decisions made in 1965, were never clearly understood. Further, there was never a clear strategy of how we were going to achieve them. Not only did we not understand the real purpose of the war, we never defined a clear plan of how to accomplish the objectives we did establish. Confusion over objectives caused us to plunge into the Vietnam "quagmire" in 1965, and haunted our actions throughout the war. As General Kinnard discovered in a 1974 survey of US Army Generals who had commanded in Vietnam, "almost 70 percent . . . were uncertain of its objectives." (Summers 105).

Not knowing the nature or the purpose of the war, it was therefore certain that we would be unable to know how to conduct the war.

## CONDUCT OF WAR

How should war be conducted? Clausewitz wrote: "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will. . . Force. . . is thus the means of war; to impose our will on the enemy is the object." (Clausewitz 75). President Johnson did not understand either the strategy or the tactics of the war he was quietly launching in 1965. Tactically, we won all our battles in Vietnam, but that was of little consolation on 30 April, 1975 as we watched North Vietnamese Army tanks roll into Saigon. When Colonel Summers confronted a North Vietnamese Colonel with the fact that North Vietnam had never defeated the Americans on the battlefield, the North Vietnamese Colonel responded with: "that may be so, . . . but it is also irrelevant." (Summers 1)

In Korea, by focusing solely on the external threat, we were able to achieve our goals. We failed to apply this lesson to Vietnam. One of the few lessons we did apply from Korea was fear of Chinese intervention. This fear severely limited our options and actions in the military task of countering the external aggression of North Vietnam. Part of the problem, as addressed earlier, was our notion of limited war, and that somehow this was a new and different kind of war. Added to this was the ever present fear of nuclear war, which was partially to blame for us not learning from our Korean experience. The nuclear factor and the overall Cold War situation caused us to ignore that limited war really is war, one involving hostilities and the supreme sacrifice of life.

Because of our many fears, we severely constrained ourselves in our approach to the conduct of the war. Our bombing campaign against the North, although massive, was politically constrained by target selection limitations and the imposition of numerous

bombing halts. Despite the constraints, much, too much was expected of the bombing, and it proved extremely costly, both in American lives and dollars. Despite all that effort, we were never able to prevent the enemy from accomplishing his objective. Similarly, our fears of escalation prevented us from interdicting Hanoi's supply routes and sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, thus guaranteeing the enemy continuous access to the battlefields in the south.

The strategy that President Johnson bought into in 1965, that of wearing down the enemy through attrition, was the only one his advisors thought available under the existing constraints. This strategy of attrition became the primary focus of our efforts throughout the war, and was brought into our homes with the daily "body counts" from the field. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong did in fact pay a terrible price in human life for their victory. But human life was one of the few resources that Hanoi had at its disposal, and the North Vietnamese leadership was willing to pay the price. Unlike us, they had convinced their people of the necessity for doing so. The other great mistake of this attrition strategy was that it was contrary to our avowed respect for the dignity of human life, and thus cost us in our own sense of righteousness, and in the eyes of the world community as well. The other great resource that the North had, and we did not, was perhaps the most powerful of all - time. It was most certainly on their side, and became a deadly weapon against our efforts.

## CONCLUSION

Reviewing the literature on Vietnam in search of "lessons," Professor of History Joe Dunn concluded that while "George Santayana reminded us that 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,' some would argue that Gladdis Smith's rejoinder is more applicable: One of the most somber aspects of the study of history is that it suggests no obvious ways by which mankind could have avoided folly.' "

( Summers 84)

It is very easy to stand 35 years away from that fateful period of decision and critique how badly President Johnson erred. While I do not believe Smith was correct, that the president was pre-ordained to lead us down that "fork in the road" leading to quagmire, he did face considerable constraints upon his options. President Johnson had the responsibility of ensuring the deterrence of the Soviet Union in a world of nuclear weapons while fighting an actual war in Vietnam. However, he failed to appreciate the consequences of his decisions because of his lack of understanding of the very nature and purpose of that war, and how to go about conducting it. The lessons Clausewitz learned from his study of war over 150 years ago point out the mistakes that President Johnson made in escalating the American involvement in Vietnam in 1965. If President Johnson and his advisors, particularly his military advisors, had understood the universality of Clausewitz' lessons, they might have realized that for all its uniqueness, the conflict in Vietnam was in fact a real war, requiring a real war effort.

As General Weyland reminds us: "There is no such thing as a war fought on the cheap. War is death and destruction." (Summers 40). For reasons which seemed valid to them at the time, President Johnson, as well as his advisors ,tried to fight and win this "dirty little war" on the cheap. The result was of course not victory and not cheap.

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